

## **REPORT ON LOWELL NHP/NPCA COMMUNITY FORUMS MARCH-APRIL 2000**

### **NPCA/Lowell NHP Community Forum Project Background:**

- Stemming from the National Park Service's Mosaics in Motion conference in January 1999, the National Parks Conservation Association has organized a national project to develop new and diverse community partner relationships for national park system units in major urban areas such as Los Angeles and Miami. The Boston Community Partners program began in spring 1999, representing parks, community leaders, and organizations ranging from New Bedford to Lowell, including Boston, Quincy, Cambridge, Brookline, Salem, and Concord.
- In August 1999, the Relevancy Committee of the NPCA Boston area partners group decided to do a "case study" at Lowell NHP. Lowell was chosen because of its diverse cultural community, the cultural themes of the park, the ongoing nature of its story, and the opportunity to influence the planning of a second generation of permanent exhibits at the 22-year old park.
- The park assigned Mike Wurm, volunteer and outreach coordinator, to work with NPCA in this project. The primary NPCA partner was ShaKing Alston, as well as the partners committee. By networking in the diverse and new immigrant communities of Lowell as well as among the old friends of the park from its earliest years, the NPCA and park invited over 350 people to participate in the forum process. Letters went out and many phone calls were made to urge participation. People were asked to tour and evaluate the park's permanent exhibits, and then participate in the primary forum day of March 11, 2000. Representatives of the diverse communities agreed to participate in the community panel starting the forum, creating a diverse cross-section of the city. Nicola Tsongas, well known community leader, served as the forum moderator. The day was extremely fruitful for the 75-plus participants.

### **Park Mandate at the Community Forums:**

Established in June 1978, Lowell National Historical Park tells the story of the American Industrial Revolution, immigration, and the labor movement as represented in Lowell. Another important element of the park's mission is to tell the story of the changing people and cultures of Lowell. As the park moves into a new century, we at the park are committed to make Lowell NHP more reflective of the diverse communities of Lowell.

The park has undertaken the planning of new exhibits for the Visitor Center and Boott Cotton Mills Museum, as well as the Suffolk Mill Turbine Exhibit. The park through the forum/community involvement process needs advice on how park exhibits should be replanned to reflect important aspects of the social and cultural history of Lowell. The park is seeking from the diverse communities of Lowell ideas for improving the park and its relevance to Lowell life and culture today.

#### **Park-NPCA Objectives in Forum Process:**

- Initiate review of park exhibits by community members that lead to improved exhibits more reflective of the changing and diverse community served by Lowell NHP; initial targeted sites are the Park Visitor Center and Boott Cotton Mills Museum.
- Increase public awareness, appreciation, and participation in the park by improving and diversifying park exhibits and programs, focusing on their connections and attractiveness to diverse communities in Lowell.
- Develop/cultivate relationships between the park and more recently settled immigrant communities.
- Plan a regular schedule of temporary community-based exhibits and programs co-sponsored and planned by the park in partnership with community organizations.
- Establish a regular park-community “partners” meeting group for communication and cooperative efforts, programs, and initiatives; and to provide feedback from community members to park management.

#### **Examples of Past Park Efforts in Diverse Community Involvement:**

- Planned and produced Working People Exhibit at Mogan Cultural Center, representing the “immigrants experience” stories of diverse cultures of “Lowell Today” in the 1980s; used ideas and recommendations of “focus groups” of community members.
- Collaborated in and helped fund oral history and folklife research that supported permanent exhibits, as well as the creation of the New England Folklife Center.
- Partnered in creation of special self-guided tour brochures on Cambodian heritage sites in Lowell.
- Co-sponsored many community exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center focusing on diverse cultures, as well as histories of Portuguese, Greek, and Jewish neighborhoods.
- Supported educational and park programs under Community Development Block Grant for Market Mills that has brought dozens of Latino families for the first time into the park and/or benefiting from park rangers providing special programs.
- Produced multi-language flyers for welcoming non-English-speaking visitors and neighbors to the park; these include Spanish and Khmer, as well as others.
- Partnered with UMassLowell in the Tsongas Industrial History Center to provide hands-on learning in heritage-related themes for all 4<sup>th</sup> grade class in Lowell public schools.

## **ISSUES STATEMENT presented at forum:**

The Lowell National Historical Park permanent exhibits were planned and installed between 1982 and 1992. They present the major park themes or topics as outlined in the park General Management Plan of 1981: Labor, Capital, Machines, Power, and Industrial City. Community input on the exhibits came from area museums, U. of Lowell (forerunner to UMassLowell) staff, and Lowell Historical Society. For the Working People Exhibit in the Mogan Cultural Center, which opened in 1989, diverse people contributed to include the most recently arrived immigrant and ethnic communities who have made their homes in the city.

Since then, the sociocultural composition of Lowell has continued to change and broaden. The park now needs assistance and advice:

- to update its permanent exhibits
- to explore whether and how to revitalize its community exhibit program to reflect the changing dynamics of the city
- to collaborate on other kinds of programs and events that present the diverse cultures
- to initiate an ongoing dialog and meeting process with representatives of diverse communities.

Recently, the park received funding to design new exhibits for the Visitor Center and a section of the Boott Cotton Mills Museum. In order to recognize and celebrate the collective cultures of our new neighbors and residents, we need your help in discussing these key questions.

## **KEY QUESTIONS:**

1. Think of your story and your culture. The year is 2010. You are touring the Lowell NHP with family and friends. How should your culture and story fit into the exhibit they are visiting?
2. Given the major park themes of Labor, Technology, Capital, Transforming Nature, and Building Community, what stories, community events, cultural celebrations, and programs would you suggest for presentation in some manner in the park?
3. What improvements would you recommend for the park's exhibits, programs, and its community relationships to increase park relevance and participation for people from all the diverse communities of Lowell?
4. How would you like to see partnerships and cooperative relationships grow between the park and your community?

## **MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS OF MARCH 2000 FORUM**

- Reexamine, update, and improve the way we tell community stories, whether the community is telling its own stories or the Park is interpreting the story.
- Seek out active community involvement in revitalizing permanent and temporary exhibits, as well as educational and interpretive programs; initiate and continue meaningful community involvement/advisory process in these exhibit projects.
- Restore an active community-driven temporary exhibits program at the Mogan Cultural Center and elsewhere with funding, technical assistance, and advice by park staff; organize and initiate community exhibits committee.
- Improve and expand the ways in which the Park connects with the community, such as an active community outreach program with commitment from staff; park will target underrepresented communities to reach new audiences.
- Market and promote the Park more effectively, both to Greater Lowell and outside audiences, but especially in the diverse, underrepresented communities and neighborhoods of Lowell.
- Hire more employees who reflect the local population, and who can speak the languages and are bi-lingual or multi-lingual; use outreach programs to recruit potential employees.
- Develop an active and continuous community dialogue within the Park. Park should initiate monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly “park partners forum”, inviting past forum participants and other people.

## **PARK/COMMUNITY IMPLEMENTATION/ACTION PLAN**

Park staff met in July 2000 to consider how the Park could best implement the suggestions and recommendations made at the Community Forum. The following represent the specific actions the park believes it can implement at this time. Each of these items will be incorporated into park planning for Fiscal Years 2001-2002. Park staff have been assigned to each item to take the lead in implementing.

1. Conduct more familiarity tours with targeted groups – i.e. city agencies, cultural and ethnic organizations, neighborhood groups, etc.
2. Expand the park's multi-language web sites and publications.
3. Create a mailer/brochure to send to parents of children attending Tsongas Industrial History Center programs, inviting them back to the park.
4. Explore more publicity opportunities in multi-language, multi-media areas.
5. Institute a speaker exchange where park staff would be available to speak with community groups.
6. Form a continuing community forum group to meet in public meetings with park staff on a periodic, regular basis. Group will work with the park on various projects such as the current three exhibit rehabilitation projects, temporary community exhibits, and programming for the Mogan Cultural Center, and other projects as developed and defined with the overall community forum group.
7. Enhance and strengthen the community focus at the Mogan Center through temporary exhibits and programs presented by community groups. This will be addressed as part of the development of a long-range plan for the Mogan Center as a community center.
8. Coordinate with education, job training and placement programs in Lowell to hire more employees who reflect the local population. Actively recruit employees with second language skills.
9. Explore building stronger relationships with community groups through shadowing/mentoring programs with high schools and colleges.
10. Participate in and support expanded and diverse special community events throughout the year.
11. Continue to use park staff as community liaisons to brief and inform community groups on park activities and invite community participation in these activities.